



DADDY DEAREST

How did Tatum O'Neal go from an Oscar winner aged 10 to a heroin and crack addict in her forties? The answer lies in her mother's neglect and her father Ryan's casual violence, she tells Helena de Bertodano

PORTRAIT Fabrice Trombert

Tatum O'Neal is like no Hollywood actress I have ever met. Instead of balking at questions of a personal nature, she needs no prompting at all: she arrives at our lunch in New York so wound up that with one tap she is off, not drawing breath for more than an hour. It is like being plugged into a high-voltage energy source.

Her main beef, after all these years, is her tempestuous relationship with her father, the actor Ryan O'Neal. "He just can't stop being cruel to me," she says, tears springing to her eyes. She talks as openly about the difficulties of being the youngest actress to win an Oscar (for *Paper Moon*, at the age of 10), her broken marriage to John McEnroe, with whom she has three children, and her long battle with drug addiction, including her arrest three years ago for buying crack cocaine in New York.

Now 47, she has just written her second autobiography in seven years, which seems more than a little excessive — until you meet her and realise she probably has another six autobiographies to go. "My family was fractured," she writes, "a stew of drama, drugs, violence and tragedy." Her latest book is called *Found: A Daughter's Journey Home*, but she admits that the title is wishful thinking and her relationship with her father is worse, not better.

"He's still just as mean," she says in a smoky, throaty voice as she launches into a conversation occasionally tinged with tears and often studded with swearwords. "He's 70 now and is probably not going to change. I just feel that at a certain point it's time to be there for your parent who is getting old and to forget the jerk that he was and the bad parent."

Wearing a gold and silver dress, her waist cinched in with a black belt, Tatum comes straight from the set of a chat show — both she and her father have flown in from their homes in Los Angeles to promote their new television docuseries, *Ryan and Tatum: The O'Neals*, a somewhat bizarre attempt to rake over the coals of their difficult relationship. "It is not a reality show," stresses Tatum, although she says her father has taken to introducing himself to people as Reality Ryan.

Despite the united front they have been presenting to promote the show, Tatum is seething inside. "I'm going to be brutally honest with you: my dad brought this woman to New York who's his 'secretary', if you will. She's about 25 and she's dated both my son Sean, who's 23, and my [half] brother Redman, who's 26. And who knows what she's done with my dad. My dad's always telling me how much she hates me and I thought, 'Why would you ever bring a girl like that, when you're doing a show about reconciliation and kindness?'"

Her manner is unusual, a mixture of



Clockwise from left: Tatum O'Neal with her father Ryan, and in the film *Paper Moon*; Tatum

winning an Oscar for her performance at the age of 10; with Ryan at her 14th birthday party



'MY MOTHER HAD A 16-YEAR-OLD BOYFRIEND WHO BEAT US. WE WERE LOCKED IN THE GARAGE FOR SO LONG THAT WE ATE DOG FOOD'

friendliness and abruptness. It is as though she's done some sort of people-skills course — but missed the last class. She keeps telling me how intelligent I seem, but as I scarcely manage to get a word in edgeways, it comes across as a little hollow. Yet having arrived at the interview feeling mildly impatient with her after reading her books, somehow I can't help liking her. And believing her. She seems to be motivated by nothing more than a desperate need to have her story told.

Ryan O'Neal's star was in the ascendant when his daughter Tatum was born in 1963. Tatum's mother, Joanna Moore, was also an actress but neither she nor Ryan rose to their duties as parents. "I think their fame gave them a sort of permission to deny their role as

parents, to float around being the celebrities that they were and absolving them of any sort of responsibility for us." After the marriage crumbled when Tatum was only 2, she and her younger brother Griffin moved to a ramshackle ranch with their mother — where they more or less brought up themselves. "In the grip of addiction [to alcohol]," Tatum writes in her first book, *A Paper Life*, "[she] virtually abandoned me and Griffin, leaving us in squalor — starving, shoeless and ragged, as well as beaten and abused by the men in her life." In her second book she adds more details: "My mother had a 16-year-old boyfriend, who beat us with switches cut from the fig tree. We were locked in the garage for so long that we ate dog food to quell our hunger."

In 1970, after their mother was arrested for drink driving and lost custody of the children, she and Griffin moved in with their father. At that stage O'Neal was Hollywood's hottest leading man, having just starred in *Love Story*. At first Tatum loved living with him in his Malibu mansion, despite having to share it with a string of women. She idolised her father and tried to accompany him everywhere. "I got in the way a lot with him and women... He ended up hating me a lot."

As she talks, she tears up pieces of bread and makes stabs at a rock shrimp salad. But she is talking so much that she leaves most of it on her plate. Sometimes, mid-sentence, she breaks off, saying, "I've just got to take a deep breath." She had her father all to herself when they

worked together on the movie *Paper Moon* — in which Tatum played the orphaned daughter of a prostitute, growing up during the Great Depression. But she says her father was not pleased when his daughter stole his thunder, winning an Oscar for her role. Neither of her parents attended the Academy Awards when she won. "People say that he was jealous and maybe that was it. He was really just too busy making another movie to take a break and come with me. Obviously I wish he'd been there. He's just really selfish."

Although she says she has never regretted winning that award, in some ways it created a weight of expectation that was almost too much. "After you win an Oscar, especially that young, you'd better kick out a pretty damn

good performance every time you work. Switching from a cute little tot as an actor into an adult woman is an extremely difficult transition to make."

She did go on to make other movies — including *International Velvet* and, as an adult, *Basquiat* and *The Runaways* — but has never recaptured the success of her first film.

As she approached her teenage years, her relationship with her father worsened. "Once I hit puberty, he didn't really want to parent me any more..." One of her best friends was Vivian Kubrick, daughter of Stanley, and Ryan would often drop off Tatum at their house. "He would leave me there for months at a time. They didn't really want me there either, so I was just a dropped-off kid." ➔

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She says her father used to hurt her physically. You mean he slapped you, I ask. “No, I mean full-fledged beating up. He beat me up and beat up my brothers [he has sons with Leigh Taylor-Young and Farrah Fawcett] and beat up Farrah.” He was arrested on charges of allegedly assaulting Griffin in 2007, but the charges were later dropped. I ask Tatum what prompted the rages. “It was usually one little word – the way abusive people are. You just say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing and you’re f*****, basically.”

When she was 14, she remembers going on holiday with him. “He took me to visit one of his girlfriends in the South of France and we went with a friend of his who had sexually abused me when I was younger. So that was already a weird boundary. We were smoking a lot of pot together in the car, and on the beach he was mocking me in front of his girlfriend. The other day I found some photos that someone took with a long lens on that beach – you see my dad pull back as if to punch me and you see me go like this [she covers her face with her hands], then he pulls back some more and I get up and start walking away and crying. It’s just so sad.” She has tears in her eyes again now. “I remember thinking, ‘Why are you embarrassing me? I’m trying to turn into a young woman and I’m only like f***** 14. You’re ruining me. You’re going to make me kill myself.’” She wrings her hands in anguish at the memory. “The thing is, why did he do that? I can’t even get him to admit why he did that or even that he did do it.”

She says she attempted suicide three times. Yet just after we speak her father appears on *Piers Morgan Tonight* to say the suicide attempts were fakes. Tatum rings me in tears of frustrated fury. “The way he talks is so cunning that you believe him. Let’s say that I was faking – which I wasn’t, because I have the scars – but let’s say I was. Why wouldn’t



Above: with Michael Jackson, whom Tatum went out with as a

teenager, in 1979. Left: with husband John McEnroe in the Eighties

ways it was the making of her. “I am very strong now. When you know what it feels like to be near death and to feel alone when you’re a little girl, and to watch your mom not be able to get up and take you to school and then your dad not to remember it’s your birthday and not let you finish high school, you have got to figure out a way to survive. Now, you could just drop me off anywhere in the world and I would figure out how to get home and more than that how to survive and how to f***** get a job. I’ve certainly learnt life skills.”

As a teenager, she went out with Michael Jackson – “He was nothing but the sweetest, most loving person in the world” – then fell in love with John McEnroe, already a tennis legend. Neither of her parents attended their 1986 wedding.

The first few years of married life were idyllic. “Until I met John, there was a lack of morality everywhere I turned in my life. But John was very moral and a great parent to our children. When I reflect on the first five or six years with John, it seems very solid and grounded and good. We were in love with each other and I felt I was in such a safe place.”

But she says the relationship foundered under her “lifetime of trauma” and the weight of McEnroe’s disappointment when he lost his No 1 ranking. “In some ways he was a bit of a baby – the pressures he was put under were monumental. His parents were hard on him. He couldn’t fail. I can’t imagine what it’s like to feel that kind of pressure.”

AT FAWCETT’S FUNERAL, SHE WENT TO GIVE HER FATHER A HUG. RYAN, NOT RECOGNISING HER, SAID, ‘HEY BABY, WANT TO GET OUT OF HERE?’

he want to know why I was doing that? If my kids were faking suicide, I’d certainly want to know why and I wouldn’t be mocking them.”

The day she rings, a Sunday, is Father’s Day in America. “We had planned to do something together today. But I’m not going to see him now and I feel very relieved. He’s just very mean to me.” Not quite sure what to say, I tell her I’m sorry. “It’s OK. I’m not saying it for pity. He’s just not very nice. People have told me my whole life: ‘Don’t go to the empty well to get water.’ I just can’t help myself.”

She says her dad no longer had much to do with his children after moving in with Fawcett in 1979. Tatum, who was 15 at the time, says she never really got to know Fawcett, who died of cancer in 2009. “I saw her as an idea of beauty; I respected her. I knew she had a difficult relationship with my dad, but in some ways I wish she’d been a bit more maternal. I really needed that kind of relationship, but no one ever really stepped in.”

Much as she wishes her childhood had been different, she does acknowledge that in some

They went through an ugly divorce, after which Tatum developed an addiction to heroin. As a result McEnroe obtained custody of their three children, Kevin, Sean and Emily. Tatum describes him in her book as a “formidable opponent”. “I think that in some ways he was very similar to my dad. He had a temper and was quick to react. These are all or nothing men; either you’re in with them or you’re out.

“He was really negative about my drug addiction. I get it, but he thought of it more as a moral weakness and a degenerative thing.” She sighs. “It is what it is. I’m moving on...”

Eventually she refound her feet and started getting roles in television dramas, including *Sex and the City* and *Law & Order* – but was arrested in 2008 buying crack. Suddenly her name was headline news again – but for all the wrong reasons. She spent the night in jail and emerged to a bevy of reporters. With grim humour she writes: “Note to drug-copping, high-profile actors: when buying crack in New York City, don’t tell cops that you’re ‘researching a part’. They won’t buy it. They will tell the press on you. And the press will relentlessly mock you for it.”

“I really felt embarrassed,” she says today. “For a woman and a mother to have an addiction into your thirties and forties is complicated and embarrassing.”

In the past three years she has worked hard to put her life back together and says she has been off all drugs and alcohol for over a year. “I did a lot of damage to myself when I was arrested. It takes time for work to come back.”

Not that she feels she has completely conquered her addiction. “I don’t think I would ever feel 100 per cent safe. I definitely avoid certain situations. I don’t hang out in bars and I don’t generally eat dinner with people who drink a lot. At first it was hard [to stay sober] but now it’s a joy. I’ve also noticed that I look better since I started living this kind of life.”

She does look remarkably well and younger than photographs taken of her a few years ago. “I was looking at a clip from an old *Oprah* and I thought, ‘Wow, Tatum, you look older in that clip.’ It does speak to an inner kind of peace that you cannot buy on the street. There’s no pill that does that for you.”

Nevertheless she resents the Hollywood pressure to look for ever youthful. “There is pressure, sure, and I see a lot of women succumb to that. The way I look at it is, I like being 47. I might feel differently if I looked really ***** horrible. I’m glad I look OK and I just think that’s luck and genes. There are 47-year-olds out there wearing tight jeans and tight blouses and the breasts are pushed up and to me it’s not appealing. I look at someone like Helen Mirren – who hasn’t had a facelift as far as I can see – and that’s what I aspire to. If I can hold out and get old in front of everybody I will be proud of myself. Wish me luck!”

O’Neal says she has never felt conflicted about telling her story. “When I wrote the first book I was very angry with my father. I didn’t care what he felt about the book. I hoped it hurt him, to be honest. I don’t really have any reservations about putting out my story because I’ve been so exploited in my life that I’d much rather [tell my story] on my terms.”

After Fawcett died, Tatum attended her funeral, not having seen her father for a long time. Once the casket had been lowered into the ground, she went to give her father a hug.

Ryan, seeing a beautiful blonde woman and not recognising her, put his arms around her and said, “Hey baby, got a drink on you? Want to get out of here?”

“At that point I had very long hair,” says Tatum, “and it was blowing over my face. I said, ‘Dad it’s me, Tatum. Your daughter.’ The thing is, he wasn’t even that embarrassed [it was Ryan who first made the story public, not Tatum]. He just sees all women the same, as something to conquer... He doesn’t seem to have respect for women in general. I fight very hard for what I believe are my rights as a woman and my rights as a daughter and my rights as a mother and I’m certainly not going to let this person who was the giver of the

know their grandfather, although her youngest son Sean tried to get close to him, even living in his house at one point. “He blew it,” says Tatum of her father, describing a time when Ryan allegedly lost his temper with Sean for refusing to appear in the reality series. “It was Sean’s birthday and they were driving home from a restaurant and he just dumped him out of the car. My dad just wanted him on the show as a sidekick. It had nothing to do with what was right for Sean.”

For a long time she blamed herself for not parenting her own children properly. “I feel I missed so much time with them that I can’t get back. That’s my big regret. But I said that to Kevin [her oldest son, an aspiring author] last night and he said, ‘Mum, I wouldn’t have been able to write the book that I wrote if we hadn’t gone through as a family what we went through.’ And I thought that was a beautiful thing for him to say. I feel now that my children like me and that’s all I could hope for.”

At the moment, says Tatum, she is “very happily single”. She feels that her childhood has made it hard for her to forge lasting relationships as an adult. “I think it damaged me. I’ve rejected almost every relationship at some point or another and I think that means

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sperm, if you will, to turn me into a piece of nothing, which is how he treats all the girls and women around him... And I’m not trying to say he’s a sleazy kind of paedophile; he’s not. But he can’t really differentiate between what is a daughter and what is a romantic thing.”

When Ryan heard his daughter was writing a second book, he was as furious as when the first was published, when he issued a statement that read: “It is a sad day when malicious lies are told in order to become a bestseller.”

“He tried a few things but he didn’t get away with stopping me from writing the book,” says Tatum. “I needed the story to be out and for other people to see what I was talking about... I have this crazy great need to kind of go back. I think it’s because if I didn’t go back, I may not be 100 per cent sure that I’m an OK person. I would believe him in some way and see myself as somehow responsible for creating the mess.”

I ask her if he’s read her book. “Yes,” she says. “He doesn’t like it. He’s writing his own book called *An Imperfect Love* about him and Farrah. He’s got a ghost writer who specialises in books on bullying. Which is ironic.”

Her three children, now grown up, hardly

that I’m ultimately rejecting [my father].” I ask her if she is pre-empting anyone rejecting her. “I won’t let that happen because that’s what happened to me when I was little. I’ve never allowed myself to love anyone as much as I loved my dad. I never did allow myself to get married again and that’s a long time now.”

She says that she forgave her mother – who had turned to Tatum for financial support when Tatum was just a teenager – for being a negligent parent before her death from lung cancer in 1997. “My mother and I worked it out in the end and got to a place where we loved each other: she passed away in my arms.” But she is not yet there with her father. “It’s funny, I thought I had forgiven him, but he just keeps doing things that are bad.”

I ask her if she still loves her father. She looks down at her hands knotted in her lap and mumbles, her words drowned by tears. Lifting her head, she tries again: “I do love him – that’s the problem.” ■

Found: *A Daughter’s Journey* by Tatum O’Neal is published by William Morrow and is available for £15.29 (RRP £16.99), free p&p, on 0845 2712134; thetimes.co.uk/bookshop